

Japan's Psychedelic Religious Cult: Aum Shinrikyo

In 1987, Shoko Asahara founded Aum Shinrikyo in Japan. This doomsday cult grew out of Mr. Asahara's yoga school and attracted many followers from Japan's elite universities. The cult's initiation rituals involved consuming LSD. The cult administered LSD to 1,700 members, administered a combination of LSD and amphetamine to another 1,000 members, and also used thiopental, mescaline, and methamphetamine, purportedly for mind-control purposes. To achieve advancement in the organization, members paid \$1,000 to drink Asahara's bath water and \$10,000 to drink a small vial of his blood. The cult made Asahara a rich man whose net worth was between \$300 million to \$1 billion.



The religious practices included shock therapy and hanging people upside down. Critics denounced the group for deceptive recruitment, detaining members against their will, extorting money from members, and murdering anybody who tried to defect. In 1989, the cult also murdered an anti-cult lawyer and his wife and children. It assassinated various outsiders who criticized the cult. They attempted an anthrax attack and succeeded in small-scale chemical-weapons attacks using VX gas and other poisons. They continued killing people for many years.

Mr. Asahara organized deadly terrorist attacks using sarin gas in the subways of Matsumoto and Tokyo in 1994 and 1995, respectively. After being convicted of these crimes, Asahara and some of his followers were executed by hanging. In 2019, a cult member avenged their executions by driving his car into a crowd, killing one person and injuring others.



The toxin struck victims down in a matter of seconds, leaving them choking and vomiting, some blinded and paralysed.





**Australia's Psychedelic Religious Cult:
The Family of Anne Hamilton-Byrne**
by R. Stuart draft 19-October-2025

In Australia circa 1957, Anne Hamilton Hamilton-Byrne (1921-2019) started a cult called "The Great White Brotherhood", whose name later changed to "The Family". The group's motto was "Unseen, Unknown, Unheard". This religious cult used LSD. The dynamics of The Family are essentially the same as what transpires in other cults, both secular and religious.



Anne Hamilton-Byrne in the trees at Lake Eildon in late 1970s (smh.com.au)

As a 34-year-old housewife, Anne Hamilton had one child and longed to adopt another. Her husband was killed in a car crash as he drove to pick up a baby from the adoption agency. The agency refused to give the baby to a

single mother, so she lost both her husband and the new baby. She decided that the two things she wanted in life were money and children.

Miss Hamilton became a yoga teacher. She convinced the women who were her students to divorce their husbands. Although divorce was stigmatized at this time, she told the women that she would look after them, that they would form a family together. Soon she realized that for her cult to grow, she needed to recruit some men. In 1962, she decided to use fraud in order to recruit Dr. Raynor C. Johnson, the master of Queens College at the University of Melbourne. First, she had sex with his gardener in order to extract a lot of personal information about the doctor. Then she knocked on Dr. Johnson's front door and told him that she was a psychic who could see that he was about to go on a trip to India with his wife, and she warned him to protect his wife's health. Dr. Johnson did go to India, and due to the poor sanitation in that country, quite predictably, his wife did get very ill. So he came to believe that Hamilton could predict the future. He told many other prominent citizens about her and these men encouraged their wives to take yoga classes from the woman who could perform miracles.

As her flock of followers grew, Hamilton had doctors in the group poison some members. She pretended to heal these sick people, who recovered when her doctors stopped poisoning them. This fostered the belief that she could perform miracles. She convinced her followers that she was Jesus Christ.

She recruited many doctors, and this was useful because at this time only two doctor's signatures were required to involuntarily commit a person to a psychiatric hospital. Dr. Johnson introduced her to Dr. Lance Howard Whitaker. A paper by Ronald Sandison in England inspired Whitaker to become the first practitioner of psychedelic psychotherapy in Australia. He administered LSD and psilocybin to his patients at Newhaven Private Hospital in Kew, Melbourne. This small facility had 30 beds, served both men and women, and offered insulin-shock therapy. Dr. Johnson hoped that he, Miss Hamilton, and Dr. Whitaker could collaborate to use LSD for spiritual rather than psychiatric healing.ⁱ

Miss Hamilton convinced an elderly woman named Joan Villimek to let her inherit Newhaven Private Hospital. After Joan died in 1969, Hamilton gained complete control of the hospital by becoming the director of the Newhaven Hospital Foundation, and trustee and executor of the estate that owned it.ⁱⁱ She had multiple dissident cult members and outside critics involuntarily institutionalized there, where they were tortured with unneeded "therapeutic" treatments. Dr. Whitaker supplied LSD to The Family, where he and his colleague Dr. John MacKay administered it to both adults and young children. The psychiatrists also administered massive doses of LSD to recruits who were temporarily admitted to the mental

hospital as patients for the single day of their trip. Some of these recruits complained that they suffered long-term adverse aftereffects from drug. Although this sounds like an experiment funded by MK-Ultra, there is no evidence that the CIA was involved in any activities at Newhaven Private Hospital.



Newhaven Private Hospital, 86 Normanby Rd, Kew

New recruits were initiated by being put in a dark room for several hours after ingesting LSD. At the height of the psychedelic experience, Hamilton suddenly appeared dressed in a white robe, illuminated by a single spotlight, with a smoke machine giving her an ethereal appearance. She solemnly announced that she was the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This cheesy theatrical stunt convinced new members that they were seeing a divine revelation.

The Family had over 500 members. They were middle class or wealthy people, often professionals who wore suits and ties, many of them with power and influence. The members joined together for weekly LSD trips during which they listened to Hamilton pontificate how she had supernatural powers, could perform miracles, that she was the Second Coming, and that she was in contact with spirits of the dead. Her followers knelt at her feet and worshiped her. Hamilton would interrogate members under the influence of LSD and extract their deepest, darkest secrets. This information was used to blackmail any member who wanted to leave or who criticized her.

Many of her followers bought properties in the village of Ferny Creek. Hamilton then required all members to donate 10% of their income to her. By the 1980s, she had collected about 50 million dollars in tithes, and used this wealth to buy valuable real estate in Australia, Kent and London in England, Hawaii and upstate New York, and elsewhere. She began requiring members to swap spouses. She convinced her followers that they were born with a huge karmic debt, and the only way they could reach salvation in the afterlife was to have unquestioning obedience to her orders. Any member who disobeyed her, or any member who wanted to leave the group, was committed to her psychiatric hospital and given brutal operations. One man who wanted to leave the cult was given a frontal lobotomy.

Doctor used sect members in LSD tests

By JOHN GILLMAN

A psychiatrist serving on Victoria's Mental Health Review Board is a former member of the religious sect, The Family, and engaged in experiments with the drug LSD on sect members in the late 1960s.

Dr Howard Whitaker worked at Newhaven, the notorious private hospital in Kew, during the 1960s where he became involved with the sect's leader, Mrs Anne Hamilton-Byrne.

His wife, Elizabeth Whitaker, is still heavily involved and was one of eight sect women charged and imprisoned in 1988 for social security fraud.

Dr Whitaker, according to documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, was one of the first doctors in Victoria licensed to use LSD and was instrumental in having a second psychiatrist, Dr Harry Bethune, licensed.

Dr Bethune later worked at Newhaven and was briefly involved with the sect.

Dr Whitaker was appointed to the Mental Health Review Board on November 4, 1987.

A former sect member and Newhaven patient, Mr Andrew Ogilvie, this week outlined details of his drug treatment, or narcotherapy, from late 1968 under Dr Whitaker.

Mr Ogilvie said that Dr Whitaker had counselled him during his marriage break-up and had steered him towards the drug treatment, or "clearings" as they were known among sect members.

He said Dr Whitaker introduced him to the sect and ultimately its leader, Mrs Hamilton-Byrne.

The Mental Health Review Board and the State Government were made aware of Dr Whitaker's involvement with the sect early last year by the Citizens' Commission on Human Rights, a group established by the Church of Scientology.

The board's president, Mr Neil Rees, wrote to the Rev. Chris Campbell of the CCHR last year explaining it was inappropriate for the board to investigate. He said it should be referred to the Medical Board of Victoria.

Mr Rees refused to comment this week. Dr Whitaker referred inquiries to his solicitor who said any comment was "entirely inappropriate" while a police inquiry was in progress.

The Sunday Herald reported last week the police taskforce, Operation Forest, investigating



Dr Whitaker: became a follower of Hamilton-Byrne in 1965.

the sect would lay charges against former, unnamed sect members within weeks.

There is no suggestion that the use or prescription of LSD was illegal at the time and there is no suggestion that charges are to be laid against Dr Whitaker.

A spokeswoman for the Health Minister, Ms Hogg, said the information raised against Dr Whitaker was allegation.

She said after the CCHR had raised the matter last year, Mr Rees reported to the minister that the allegations could not be substantiated.

Dr Whitaker is believed to have started working at Newhaven in the early 1960s, before Hamilton-Byrne became involved with the hospital.

She started working there, possibly as a nurse, and the two became friends.

Dr Whitaker is understood to have become a follower about 1965. The hospital was a recruiting ground for sect members.

He now works as a psychiatrist in Albury and is a member of the Mental Health Review Board representing a northern Victorian hospital.

The FoI documents, obtained by the CCHR, show Dr Whitaker attended a meeting with Victoria's Chief Health Officer, Dr Ralph Farnbach, and three other doctors on March 16, 1967, at which he suggested LSD and another hallucinogen, psilocybin, be allocated to Newhaven and three other hospitals.

It was the first meeting after the State Government changed the laws relating to the use of LSD and established a licensing system for doctors who would administer it.

The drugs were obtained free of charge from the Swiss pharmaceutical firm Sandoz.

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Due to the Cold War, many people feared nuclear weapons. Hamilton told her followers that the end of the world was approaching, and that her followers would survive the coming apocalypse. In order to repopulate the world, they would need children.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hamilton assembled a family of 28 kidnapped children whom she raised alongside her own child. She ordered her doctors at the psychiatric hospital seize custody of babies born to patients. The doctors held a pillow over the mother's face so she could not see the baby as she gave birth. Hamilton's network of doctors fraudulently seized children from unwed and teenage mothers elsewhere in Australia. Her members who were lawyers forged birth certificates and adoption records. Hamilton required some members to give her custody of their babies. She stole her second husband's grandchild to raise as their own son.

In 1968, Hamilton identified a British Businessman named Bill Byrne as the man whom she wanted to marry. Byrne was happily married with four children. So Hamilton got rid of his wife (who was perfectly sane) by having the cult's doctors involuntarily commit her to the mental hospital that Hamilton owned. As a patient, the wife was starved, pumped full of drugs, imprisoned in a dark room, and subjected to humiliating and invasive medical procedures that she did not need. Then Hamilton convinced Mr. Byrne to abandon his four children and marry her.



Mrs. Hamilton-Byrne forced her 29 children to perform as if they were a happy family when they made public appearances for the purpose of recruiting new members. But she did not want to be bothered by having to actually be a parent. So she hired “Aunties”, who were female caretakers to raise her children. Some of the Aunties were the biological mothers of the children whom they had turned over to Hamilton-Byrne. The Aunties enforced a strictly regimented routine. The 29 kids grew up on a private property with no electricity or running water, cut off from all information about the outside world. The Aunties punished the slightest misbehavior with frequent beatings with hands, canes, metal rulers, whips, and slats of wood with nails sticking out of the end. Other punishments included starvation, cold showers, dunking the child’s head in a bucket of water, waterboarding, and holding the child’s hands over an open flame. Even babies were punished for wetting their bed by beatings and a bath in freezing-cold water. When Hamilton-Byrne was away traveling in other countries, she enjoyed phoning home so she could hear the cries of her children being beaten by the Aunties.



These malnourished children were given little food, but had to watch the Aunties eat luxurious meals. In order to survive, the starving children ate grass, leaves, their own feces, and moldy bread scavenged out of the garbage. At least one of the girls became so malnourished that she got a distended stomach and she was unable to walk so she crawled around on her stomach. One 12-year-old girl only weighed 20 Kg (44 U.S. pounds) and was very short because she suffered from “psychosocial short stature”,

which is when a child stops producing growth hormones due to living in a highly stressful environment.

The Aunties instilled anti-sexual programming in the girls. Girls as young as age five were lambasted for supposedly walking in a sexy manner. Byrne screamed at the girls that cancerous tumors would grow out of their genitalia. This led the girls to hate their bodies and think they were ugly and dirty. This self-loathing caused some of the girls to hold their breathe till they fainted, to cut their skin with pins and scissors, and to rub dirt into their wounds.

Children as young as age eight or nine were administered LSD twice a day. Some children were kept on LSD continuously for at least couple weeks. Upon reaching age 14, the children had the initiation ceremony where their mother appeared in the spotlight after the kids had spent several hours in a dark room under the influence of a high dose of LSD.



"She had me under LSD for days ... she'd just come in like every 12 hours or so and give me another piece because I wasn't working hard enough," said Sarah Moore

Church Street Films

The cult started to go downhill in the late 1980s. The police searched Hamilton-Byrnes's home due to a false accusation that she might have kidnapped a missing child from the village. During the raid, Hamilton-Byrnes's children hid in a secret underground room called "the Hole". The Aunties had dug this room for just such a contingency. The children had

been taught to fear outsiders, and weretold that the police would rape and kill them if they ever raided the place. Nevertheless, when the oldest two children became teenagers, they rebelled by stealing food from nearby houses and bringing it back to the cult to feed their siblings.



Meanwhile, Hamilton-Byrne was unable to prevent many members from defecting and talking to the media. She eventually gave up being leader and moved to her house in upstate New York. She left management of the children to the Aunties. In 1987, Hamilton-Byrne told her eldest daughter, who had become rebellious, “You are no longer our daughter, so go out and die in the gutter.” The two oldest daughters went to the police. The police took their accusations very seriously. The cops promptly stormed the compound and Hamilton-Byrnes’s other homes in Australia. They rescued the children, arrested the Aunties, confiscated huge stashes of LSD, and seized a trove of internal cult documents with compromising personal information about its rich and powerful members. This impelled most of the members to leave the cult. The authorities shut down Hamilton-Byrnes’s psychiatric hospital. The LSD expert Dr. Whitaker lost his medical license.

In 1993, Hamilton-Byrne and her husband were arrested in New York and extradited to Australia. Hamilton-Byrnes’s followers who worked inside Australia’s criminal justice system stymied prosecution for the major crimes. Despite the police gathering extensive incriminating evidence, the prosecutors only charged Hamilton-Byrne with one charge of forging three birth certificates. Her punishment was a puny \$5,000 fine.



Anne and Bill Hamilton-Byrne arrest photos

The social workers kept the 29 children together while rehabilitating them. The children had to be taught how to live in the outside world. They had never been allowed to access food so they were afraid to go near a refrigerator. They flinched whenever an adult came near them because they expected to be beaten. Some of the children grew up to live normal lives, but a few committed suicide.

In 2004 Hamilton-Byrne was diagnosed with dementia. She died in 2019. She bequeathed her millions to the remaining cult members, leaving none to her children.

Danielle Kirsty provided most of the information in this account of The Family.ⁱⁱⁱ

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- iii Kirsty, Danielle. 2023. "The Most Notorious Cult in Australian History - Anne Hamilton Hamilton-Byrne & 'The Family'". #daniellekirsty. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzvApT-ofU> accessed 19-October-2025. LSD theatrics use discussed in minutes 22:50 to 24:15.